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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cox, R. (2007). The Au Pair Body. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(3), 281-296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506807079015>

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# The Au Pair Body

## Sex Object, Sister or Student?

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**ABSTRACT** The employment of au pairs to provide childcare, cleaning and other domestic services has been steadily increasing in the UK. This article provides an analysis of representations of au pairs in the British press and on the websites of agencies placing au pairs. This analysis seeks to understand how such imaginings of au pairs affect their life in Britain and how au pairs themselves respond to such imaginings. It argues that the competing portrayals of au pairs as both sexual sirens and committed carers works with other ambivalences in the scheme to facilitate the growth of au pair employment in Britain while simultaneously denying their place as an important source of domestic labour for British families.

**KEY WORDS** au pairs ♦ bodies ♦ employment agencies ♦ migration ♦ representation

### INTRODUCTION

The employment<sup>1</sup> of au pairs has been steadily growing in Britain and other parts of Europe during the last decade (Addley, 2002; Anderson, 2000; Cox, 2006; Hess and Puckhaber, 2004; Lowe and Gregson, 1989; Lutz, 2002, 2004; Platt, 2001) and au pairs have proved popular, not only with the families who depend upon them, but also in the public imagination. This article explores the ways that au pairs are imagined and portrayed in the British press and by au pair agencies. Overwhelmingly, au pairs are represented in the press as young, attractive and promiscuous, while agencies strive to portray them as pretty and happy but not sexually available. This article considers the effects that such competing images have on au pairs in Britain and how they respond to the contradictions in such imaginings. The ambivalence in representations of au pairs can be related to other

ambivalent aspects of their position. They are migrant domestic workers who are constructed by official discourses as neither workers nor migrants but as participants in a 'cultural exchange' programme.

The au pair scheme is an agreement between a group of European countries<sup>2</sup> that is meant to allow cultural exchange for young people and provide a bit of help to families with young children. In Britain, au pairs can come from any European Economic Area (EEA) member country or a list of other European countries. Until the end of 2002, this excluded much of Eastern Europe but in December 2002 seven Eastern European countries were incorporated into the scheme because the British government was concerned that the expansion of the EU would restrict the number of au pairs available to British families (Addley, 2002). Au pairs must be aged between 17 and 27 years, cannot be married or have dependent children. They can stay in Britain for up to two years but must leave the country within a week if they are not living with a 'host family' (Home Office, 2002). Au pairs are meant to live as members of their employers' families and should be treated as equals (the translation of the phrase 'au pair') rather than as paid servants. They are meant to do 25 hours a week of 'light housework' or childcare plus two evenings of babysitting. They must have the opportunity to learn English; however, employers do not contribute to the cost of language classes. The Home Office advises that au pairs are given £45 per week 'pocket money' plus their own room and meals. Au pairs do not have work permits but au pair visas, and employers do not have to pay tax or national insurance for them, nor does minimum wage legislation cover their work. Au pairs, therefore, are defined as largely white, young, European and unmarried. The vast majority are women and until 1993 men were not eligible to join the scheme (see also Williams and Baláz, 2004).

Au pairs are thus constructed in official discourse as neither workers nor migrants but as 'guests' of 'host families' on a temporary sojourn. Their labour is not considered to be labour but the natural activity of any family member (see Cox and Narula [2004] and Hess and Puckhaber [2004] for discussions of the effects of supposed family membership on au pairs' workloads and exploitation). This article explores other representations of au pairs that join this official portrayal to create the milieu within which au pairs experience Britain. It begins with a discussion of the importance of embodiment and appearance to paid domestic work in general. It then moves on to explore the representation of au pairs within the mainstream press in Britain and how this contrasts with the images used on agency websites, before discussing how these imaginings affect au pairs working in Britain and how they respond to these competing constructions.

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EMBODIMENT, APPEARANCE AND PAID DOMESTIC WORK

Geographers and sociologists have become increasingly interested in the body and physical appearance as producers of both experiences and reactions (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001; Longhurst, 2001; Pile and Nast, 1998; Pratt, 2004; Skeggs, 2004; Teather, 1999; Valentine, 2001). Our bodies can modify experiences of space and elicit reactions from others. This is true most obviously in terms of mobility, gender, age and skin colour but there are also more subtle differentiations between bodies and bodily experiences (see, for example, Longhurst [2001] on pregnant bodies, Colls [2004] on 'big' bodies or McDowell [1997] on corporate bodies). Following from Bourdieu, who described the body as 'sign bearing and sign-wearing' (Bourdieu, 1984: 192), Skeggs (2004) has argued that class is also read from the body in myriad ways, from 'big hair' to sensible shoes.

Bourdieu argues that the body is a powerful purveyor of messages because it is imagined to be natural and to represent 'the most natural expression of innermost nature' (Bourdieu, 1984: 192). Rather than just seeing the exterior of people, we imagine that we are able to see their abilities, character and moral worth. As Bourdieu puts it, 'there are no merely "physical" facial signs; the colour and thickness of lipstick, or expressions, as well as the shape of the face or the mouth, are immediately read as indices of a "moral" physiognomy, socially characterized'.

## MIGRANT WOMEN – LABOURING BODIES

Appearance and embodiment, therefore, affect life chances and one of the most important realms in which this has been identified is in the world of work. The embodiment of personal service workers has been shown to be a particularly important element of their work (see, for example, Erikson, 2004; Hochschild, 1983; Monaghan, 2002) and discourses surrounding migrant workers have made visible these otherwise invisible assumptions.

Migrant women's bodies have long been identified as particularly well suited to heavy or demeaning work. In the 19th century they were actively differentiated from the home-bound, conspicuously idle bodies of indigenous ruling-class and middle-class women (McClintock, 1995; Walter, 2001). Walter (2001) has argued that the 'cult of domesticity' – so important to both male and female middle-class identities – depended upon the labour of Irish women servants, and also upon the identification of Catholic Irish servants as 'a race apart' from the British middle class. The creation of the Victorian and Edwardian middle-class home as a space of idleness and the conspicuous display of wealth was dependent on large amounts of labour by women (and some men) who were characterized as

appropriate workers on the basis of physical and moral attributes read from their class and nationality (McClintock, 1995).

In more recent times, other groups of women migrants have been identified as appropriate workers by the British state. Webster (1998) has shown that the 1950s ideology of a return to the home for a broad swathe of British women was actually based upon the increased labour of black Caribbean women in the public sphere. Similarly, McDowell (2005) details the migration paths of Latvian 'volunteer workers' who came to Britain following the Second World War. They were recruited through government schemes to fill unattractive jobs as domestic workers in homes and hospitals and as workers in textile mills. She shows that at each point in their journeys their embodiment as young, white and female cast them as appropriate for particular types of work. The British government imagined them as suitable workers because they were not British, yet also as possible mothers of future Britons because they were white and European. These studies demonstrate the ambiguous relationship between the British state's need to attract migrant labour while still wanting to repel foreign 'others' and maintain that women's proper place is in the home. The body of the female migrant is used to negotiate this contradiction. In each case, government discourses produced these women as both sufficiently different from and similar to British women to make particular forms of work acceptable or appropriate.

A number of studies in a range of different countries have revealed the attention paid to various aspects of domestic workers' bodies. Racial/ethnic stereotypes appear to shape entry to the workforce in a number of places. For example, Pratt (1997) has detailed the contrasting images of Filipina and European nannies in Vancouver. A range of competencies, characteristics (such as caring/formality) and pay scales (!) attach to nannies depending on whether they are Asian or European. Similarly, Stiell and England (1999) have offered a detailed hierarchy of ethnicity for domestic workers in Toronto, with workers of different ethnicities assumed to be suited to different types and amounts of work.

My own research in London, UK, revealed precise differentiations between different parts of the domestic labour market with only certain types of bodies able to get certain jobs (see Cox, 1999). In fact, when I was carrying out interviews with agencies in London an agent told me that she had been concerned when I had first walked into the office. She did not know her colleague had an appointment with me and had assumed I was looking for work. In her words, she knew 'as soon as she looked at me' that she could not place me. She elaborated that it was impossible to place British women, as they 'were not subservient enough'. This agent was obviously used to the currency of bodies. My own, acceptable as a researcher perhaps, was observed, considered and rejected as not containing an appropriate domestic worker.

In addition to the broad categories of ethnicity and gender, the specific shape of domestic workers' bodies has also been revealed to be an important component of their ability to access work and their experiences at work. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) reports in her study of domestic employment in Los Angeles that domestic workers are always asked to submit a picture of themselves with job applications and that agencies reported the attractive woman would always be selected by employers over a less attractive one. However, only certain forms of domesticated attractiveness are encouraged and domestic workers in almost all situations are advised not to wear 'sexy' clothes to interviews or work, or even to wear clothes that look too 'upmarket' or smart.

Despite this aversion, there is a long history of an association between the servant and the sex object. McClintock (1995: 94, drawing on Gallop, 1982) describes sex with servants as a threshold act 'somewhere between incest and exogamy'. Feudal masters assumed rights to sexual access to all the young women they employed, as did slave owners over slaves. In later centuries, it was often assumed that young men would have their first sexual experiences with the servants (Dawes, 1989; Horn, 2004; McClintock, 1995; Swift, [1745]2003) and the 'French maid's outfit' is still with us today as a representation of the sexualization of domestic labour.<sup>3</sup> The embodiment of domestic workers is, therefore, very important both as a control over access to jobs and to experiences within them.

#### AU PAIRS AS PORN STARS AND SISTERS – MEDIA AND AGENCY IMAGES

It is not just the 'real' appearance of 'real' domestic workers and au pairs that matters. It is the meanings that are read from bodies that produce reactions and dictate how people are treated. Skeggs (2004) has argued that to read a body or an object as containing meaning is to commit a fallacy: 'the meaning of things is assumed to be a property of the object itself, rather than a response to the feeling, or *the relationship* of the reader to the object' (Skeggs, 2004: 100; emphasis in the original). When we read meaning from a body we bring to it our previous experiences and knowledge and also our own prejudices, fears and priorities. This means that representations of things that are in circulation, for example in the media, are important in influencing how meanings are read. Such representations provide a store of 'information' that we can use to read meaning from other people's bodies. So while young men who look like they could be Muslim could have their bodies read as 'terrorist' and 'extremist', some other groups, such as au pairs, have their appearance read in a quite different way.

In this section, I look at how au pairs are represented and discursively constructed in Britain both in the mainstream media and on specialist

agency websites. For some reason, the au pair has a very particular place in the British imagination as a sexually available and attractive young woman and this representation emerges in many media representations. However, agencies, while still representing au pairs overwhelmingly as attractive, white and female, produce images of a more domesticated femininity than an overtly sexual one. The images on agency websites actively construct the au pair as pleasant and attractive yet unthreatening and sisterly.

Data on representations of au pairs were gathered from two sources. First, a search of newspaper articles was carried out on the Lexis Nexis database to find articles in the UK press that contained the phrase 'au pair'. The subject matter and tone of the first 50 of these (all published in July and August 2005) was then recorded as an indication of widespread representations of au pairs. This used a simple content analysis involving recording the frequency with which the topic of au pairs' appearance or attractiveness was mentioned compared to other topics and how often phrases drawing on national or ethnic stereotypes were used. Second, an analysis of images on websites of agencies that place au pairs in British homes was carried out to provide information on representations circulating within the sector. Thirty websites were explored and the images on their home pages, pages aimed at employers and pages aimed at au pairs, were categorized according to content. The images chosen by agencies to represent au pairs – i.e. not the pictures submitted by au pairs looking for placements nor images on the sites of things such as tourist attractions – were then subjected to a simple content analysis. An analysis of this type is used to show how images construct accounts of the social world and how specific discourses become constructed as natural or truthful (Rose, 2001). In this case the analysis was used to reveal the ways images of au pairs were used to construct their place in British families and society.

In addition, as part of a larger project (see Cox and Narula, 2004), information was gained from au pairs and those working in the sector. A questionnaire survey of 140 au pairs working in London, focus group discussions with over 30 au pairs attending language classes and in-depth interviews with 11 au pairs provided detailed information about experiences of migration to the UK and treatment while in the country. Two agencies that place au pairs and a representative from one voluntary group that supports au pairs were also interviewed to gather data about the sector as a whole.

#### ICE MAIDENS, GODDESSES AND SULTRY TEMPTRESSES – MEDIA IMAGES OF AU PAIRS

The idea of au pairs as sexually available and desirable appears to have great tenacity in the British imagination. There seems to be something about the combination of gender, youth and location within the family

home that positions au pairs as willing and available sexual partners. Their slight foreignness, different but not dangerous, seems to add to this. As the blurb for the film *Au Pair Girls* puts it 'The very mention of au pair girls conjures up images of continental nymphos wanting to jump into any bed' (found on Amazon.co.uk). A content analysis of newspaper articles was carried out to discover if sexualized images did dominate the representations of au pairs that were in common circulation.

The analysis of 50 press articles found that 23 articles used the term 'au pair' in passing as a neutral description of someone's job; a number referred to an au pair who had been killed in the 7 July bombings in London, for example. Of the remaining 27 that discussed issues relating to au pairs in more detail, 15 discussed au pairs specifically in terms of their appearance or sexual availability and 12 discussed issues such as finding an au pair or negotiating work. In other words, those newspaper articles that discussed au pairs in any detail at all were more likely to comment on issues of appearance and attractiveness than anything of substance to the role.

The majority of these articles focused on the possibility of au pairs having affairs with the fathers from their host families. They either contained discussions by men fantasizing about such an event or advice to and from women about how to avoid such a thing. For example, in an extremely sexist and lascivious piece in *The Observer* (24 July 2005), Toby Young described his family's new au pair as 'a sunny optimistic goddess', 'fresh meat' and 'a hot little number' and despaired at the fact that his wife had caught him trying to take her out to dinner at The Ivy.

National and ethnic stereotypes were also mobilized by newspaper articles to express particular forms of sexual attractiveness. *The Express* (25 July 2005) advised readers never to hire 'a flaxen-haired Swedish ice maiden or a sultry Italian temptress' as an au pair. One article used stereotypes of Eastern European women as overly masculine when advising readers how to find a non-threatening au pair and the (male) *Sunday Times* restaurant reviewer (24 July 2005) even described Ikea restaurants as 'the best place in Britain to pull a homesick au pair' – the implication being both that au pairs are Swedish and that they are 'pullable'.

Newspaper reports representing au pairs as sexually attractive have a resonance with Victorian representations of nursemaids and nannies and can be thought of as drawing on oedipal fantasies as well as the Madonna/whore dichotomy. McClintock (1995) has argued that a sexual attraction to servants involved in childcare ran through the Victorian British male, middle-class psyche and surfaced in memoirs, stories and pornography. She suggests that oedipal sexual fantasies were as likely to focus on nannies as on mothers. In fact, in his letters Freud documents his own early sexual experiences with his nanny and his sexual fantasies surrounding her, which he later develops into his work on the Oedipus complex.<sup>4</sup> This division of labour within the middle-class home also



underpinned the Madonna/whore dichotomy. It allowed middle-class women to appear remote and pure while maids were associated with biology, lechery and excess. 'The Victorian splitting of women into whores and Madonnas . . . has its origins, then, not in universal archetype, but in the class structure of the household' (McClintock, 1995: 87; see also Stallybrass and White, 1986). The newspaper descriptions of au pairs can be considered in this light. The 'threshold act' of sex with the au pair who is both outside and inside the family – a mother figure who is not a mother – may be particularly attractive. When au pairs are portrayed as overtly sexy in comparison to more dowdy mothers and as sexually available when mothers are distant and uninterested, we can hear echoes of potent male fantasies that have their roots in British history as well as in the nursery.

These media representations are both drawing on and feeding into widely held imaginings of au pairs as alluring, exotic and sexually available. The au pair is assumed to be female and attractive and her foreignness is portrayed as part of her attraction rather than as alien or unwelcome. She is represented as an object of desire not as a scrounging migrant nor as an important provider of childcare. Such representations are part of the context within which au pairs experience life and work in Britain.

## SISTERS AND CARERS – AGENCY IMAGES

For those involved in the au pair sector, as (prospective) au pairs or employers, placement agencies are an important source of information and advice as well as of work and domestic help. An analysis of the images used on agency websites was undertaken to give an 'inside' view of the sector, a view that is largely aimed at families (normally women) looking for an au pair. The images on websites were selected for analysis rather than text as the text on most sites was practical, guiding users around the site and visuals of some kind dominate most web pages. Some sites have easily accessible pages where au pairs looking for work and families looking for au pairs describe themselves but on many sites these pages cannot be accessed until a person has registered and therefore comparison of such pages is impossible.

An analysis of the images used on 30 websites placing au pairs in Britain reveals that images of au pairs are not unproblematic, and that particular kinds of domesticated attractiveness are focused on. It seems that employment agencies have to escape the highly sexualized imaginings of au pairs that circulate in society generally but still represent them as attractive young women without responsibilities other than those for their employers' family and home. While the majority of sites did use photos, one-third of the total examined did not and one used only images of tourist attractions.

In total, there were 52 pictures of au pairs on the websites (other than on listings pages) and these overwhelmingly represented a single, female au pair with one or more child. In the majority of pictures, the au pair was smiling and looking intently at the child or children, thus portraying her deep care for the child and her enjoyment of the role of carer. All of the au pairs pictured on sites I examined were young women who corresponded to the norms of healthy and youthful good looks. Almost all were blonde, had gleaming white teeth and all but two were white and northwest European in appearance. In fact, there were more pictures of black children (two) than of black au pairs. A good looking 'girl next door' or sister might be imagined (see Hess and Puckhaber, 2004). None of the au pairs pictured had low cut tops or short skirts, obvious jewellery or make up. In fact none of them was portrayed as overtly sexually attractive in any way. Rather, they showed a scrubbed-clean and brightly smiling enthusiasm for whatever childcare activity they were involved in. Interestingly, the poses shown often have the body of the au pair concealed behind the child. The au pair may be cuddling the child, reading to them or playing with them, but normally, very little of her body is visible. The au pair is in some way 'disembodied' by her intense care for the child, in a way that is equivalent to women in general being desexualized by the duties of motherhood. Perhaps such agency images are going some way towards reversing the au pair's placing in the Madonna/whore dichotomy.

Many of the pictures used, particularly on the home pages of the sites, appeared to be professionally produced and featured professional models rather than being snapshots of real au pairs. Agencies are, therefore, considering carefully the images that they want to show and the representations they are choosing are of a slightly domesticated but still very attractive femininity. Where lists of prospective au pairs were accessible all had photos of the au pairs (see Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Pratt, 1997) but the equivalent pages listing families looking for au pairs were much less likely to contain images and even those that did have a space for a photo did not always have this filled. The appearance of au pairs is, therefore, assumed to be an element of her (or sometimes his) employability by all involved in the sector.

Images used by agencies differ from the overt sexuality of newspaper representations of au pairs but they do not challenge the ideal of the au pair as female, white and blonde. In contrast, websites that arrange nanny placements use very few photographs and tend to have cartoon-style motifs or text only rather than large images of 'nannies'. The physical appearance of the au pair, both real and imagined, seems to be a much more important element of employment arrangements than it is for other childcarers.

The representation of au pairs as highly feminine and physically attractive is in contrast to the discourses surrounding the bodies of other

migrant women workers. It has been common for the femininity of migrant workers to be denied and for them to be seen as unattractive and excessively masculine; in being workers they could not also be real, feminine women (McClintock, 1995; McDowell, 2005; Walter, 2001). However the femininity of au pairs appears to be heightened in both media and agency representations. This is not an unequivocal good, however, as such representations tend to disguise the real work that au pairs do. Imagining the au pair as sex object or sister negates her role as childcarer and domestic worker and in doing so protects both the families that employ au pairs, and the British state more generally, from giving the impression that labour is being imported to carry out domestic work (see Hess and Puckhaber [2004] on the portrayal of au pairs as 'big sisters' in Germany and the US).

### AU PAIR EXPERIENCES: LIVING WITH THE IMAGES

Au pairs living and working in London have to cope with and negotiate a route through these competing and contradictory imaginings. Outside their host family they can find themselves subject to assumptions and innuendo about their sexual availability, while inside their home and workplace au pairs often encounter employers who are fervent in their efforts to police their sexuality and their encounters with men. Many of the au pairs interviewed found the interest in their appearance from employers and others inexplicable and sometimes offensive and countered these portrayals by de-emphasizing their physical attributes and emphasizing their status as serious students or professionals.

Au pairs' experience of the interest taken in their physical appearance can begin when they first start looking for a position and they may find that appearance can be a control on accessing jobs. As shown earlier, in many domestic jobs there is a 'perfect' level and type of physical attractiveness, with women who deviate from this, by being too sexual, or thought to be unattractive, finding it more difficult to get positions or to get desirable positions. Agencies who were interviewed commented that employers do not want au pairs who appear to be unfit or unhealthy – characteristics that they read from weight and acne – but neither did they want someone who is going to be a rival. Thus au pairs are expected to fit a narrowly defined type of attractiveness that represents fitness enough to do the (quite physically demanding) job without overt sexual attraction. In addition, au pairs who are too 'exotic' – who are not white, or are wearing traditional Muslim dress for example – may find they have the wrong kinds of bodies and have more difficulty getting au pair placements or are steered towards the least attractive placements – those outside London, with responsibility for many young children or in single-parent families.

The au pairs interviewed had all successfully found positions in Britain and had, therefore, passed this first 'test'. They did not have trouble conforming to the image expected of them nor did they find such expectations problematic or troubling, or at least no more so than the other demands put on them to secure a job. Those who had arranged their positions through formal routes, such as agencies and websites, rather than through friends, had sent photos of themselves in advance. Some of the au pairs had been given detailed advice about the best way to present themselves and had conformed to this and selected their photos carefully.

Once they arrive in Britain, au pairs face greater contradictions in the ways they are imagined as the agency portrayal of the 'clean-living carer' is joined by the media portrayal of the 'sexual temptress'. The most obvious outcome of the imagining of au pairs as attractive and promiscuous is that they can find that men in Britain assume that they are sexually available and often have to counter insinuations about their sexual activities when they meet British men. As one of the interviewees put it:

Most of them, I'll tell you, especially the guys, the first time you meet and say 'I'm an au pair'. Arrgghhh! [in a man's voice] 'I know, at night we can be together'. I'm not for that, you know, I'm not there to have sex with you. But they think, the first time, because you are an au pair, you are ready.

Other interviewees commented on the fact that many of the people they came into contact with advised them to 'get a boyfriend'. This was seen as the best way to learn English and to solve other problems. One of the au pairs reported that a friend of hers had gone to the police when she had been harassed in the street by a group of drunken men. The policeman had responded by saying 'I don't know what's this au pair girl's problem. Why don't they get a boyfriend or something to walk them home?' While the policeman may have made an equally crass comment about any woman walking home at night, the au pair it happened to and her friend retelling the story both saw it as a comment on their position as au pairs specifically.

Within their host family, au pairs can confront other interpretations of their bodies. First of all it must be stated that, despite journalists' seeming fascination with tales of affairs between host fathers and au pairs, research among au pairs and agencies found no evidence of such relationships. In fact, relationships of any kind between host fathers and au pairs seemed to be largely absent. Au pairs related to host mothers to discuss their work and few mentioned their host father by name. One agent explained that many fathers would avoid the au pair as much as possible, to the extent of not even learning her name, both because they took no interest in the running of the house – of which she was seen as part in the same way as the vacuum cleaner might be – and because they did not want to be accused of taking too much of an interest in her. In this situation, the stereotype of the father

running off with the au pair actually works to isolate au pairs within their employing households and reduces their contact with other adults.

A second way in which employers' imaginings of au pairs' sexuality can affect their experiences is in rules and limitations put on having male visitors to the house. In the survey, au pairs were asked if they would be allowed to have a boyfriend to stay the night and 41 percent said no, while 18 percent were not allowed to have any male friends to visit at any time (see Cox and Narula [2004] for a more detailed discussion of such rules). One of the au pairs interviewed explained the strictness of this prohibition from her employers:

Any boy is strictly prohibited, even my boyfriend, it is no question, no point at all [asking], even my brother, or any body. . . . She told me at the beginning that it would be best if they even didn't wait in front of the gate, they should wait for me somewhere at the tube station, not, not to even approach the house.

While there can be a range of reasons for these rules, some of which are framed in terms of concerns for the safety of the employers' children if 'strange' men are allowed in the house, the au pairs interviewed saw them as hinting at the likelihood of promiscuous behaviour if they were not constrained. In fact, very few of the au pairs interviewed or taking part in focus groups had boyfriends, and of those that did almost all were in their home country. Rules which restricted interaction with female friends were seen as much more problematic than those banning male friends. They had not come to Britain to find an English boyfriend and they found rules designed to police their sexual activity, and the instrumentalist attitudes towards relationships that were displayed when people advised them to find a boyfriend in order to improve their English, insulting on many levels.

For au pairs the competing imaginings of their bodies are problematic and surprising and contrast with the ways in which they think of themselves. While most au pairs do not perhaps consciously respond to these imaginings, among those interviewed there were two strategies that could be seen as reactions to these stereotypes. The first of these is to emphasize their status as students or professionals. The vast majority of au pairs, including all those surveyed, come to Britain primarily to learn English or to improve their English. All the au pairs interviewed were relatively highly educated; those from Eastern Europe all had a degree and those from Western Europe were generally between school and university. They were studious and serious, devoting as much money and time as possible to their studies. In interviews the identity of 'student' or a professional role that predated au pair work (and might be returned to afterwards) such as 'engineer' could be claimed by au pairs to counter other identities that they felt were derogatory. Most often this was in response

to being cast as 'a servant' but it was also mobilized by au pairs to oppose assumptions that they were flighty or only interested in meeting men. For example, when au pairs were asked what they did in their free time, only one said she liked to go to pubs and clubs to go dancing and meet people. The others all emphasized the cultural activities and visits they took part in and the efforts they made to practise their English. They were happy to portray themselves as quiet, bookish and hard-working.

The second strategy au pairs appeared to use to counter representations that focused on their appearance was to try to be as physically unobtrusive as possible. Zuzana Búriková (2006: 113) has written on the ways in which au pairs in London use a 'series of strategies of self-erasure' to cope with the ambivalent position they have within their employers' homes. She argues that 'rather than wanting to make a good impression, au pairs become increasingly concerned not to make an impression at all'. Her work details the ways in which au pairs strive to minimize their physical impact within their rooms by hiding away their belongings and not decorating the walls. Such strategies can also apply to au pairs' bodies. Not only do they absent themselves from the home whenever possible, the au pairs who were interviewed tended to look unobtrusive at most times. They had little money to spend on clothes or cosmetics and favoured saving money to spend on trips or more English classes rather than perfecting their appearance. The result of these two strategies is that au pairs are able to present an image which conforms to that favoured by employers, of the healthy but not sexy young woman, while also highlighting their status as educated and serious adults.

## CONCLUSION – THE YOUNG WHITE WOMAN AS AN INVISIBLE MIGRANT

As Skeggs (2004) has argued, representations matter. Representations of au pairs – as attractive and available sexual partners and simultaneously as devoted and happy carers – not only frame their experiences of life in Britain, they work to deny the reality of their labour. When combined with official discourses that construct au pairs as neither migrants nor workers such representations are powerful. Their work is overlooked and trivialized in the same way by media and agency representations as it is in their official construction as 'cultural exchange' participants.

This denial of au pairs' work is convenient both for the British state and for individual employers. There is a shortage of childcare options for most families in Britain and there is pressure on the government to facilitate this very cheap form of childcare rather than clamp down on it (see Mattingly [1999] for an account of a similar situation in the US, where immigration policy has facilitated the employment of undocumented

migrants in private homes). For employers, anxious to find affordable domestic help, there is little interest in the cultural exchange element of the scheme and few take it seriously. Employers seldom treat their au pairs as equal nor do they stick to the working hours and conditions set out by the scheme, yet rarely will they be confronted by this reality. Instead of thinking of the person providing their childcare as an undocumented migrant being paid less than the minimum wage, employers can think of their 'au pair' and 'common sense' and the media tell them that au pairs are not illegal or exploited, they are happy-go-lucky young things or perhaps 'sunny optimistic goddesses'.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the Nuffield Foundation Social Science Small Grant number SGS/00466/C, which made possible the research on which this article is based; Rekha Narula who acted as research assistant on the project and Lewis Holloway, members of the Gender Studies group at Birkbeck, University of London and the editor and two anonymous referees for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. I use the terms 'employment', 'employed', etc., although strictly speaking au pairs are 'guests' of 'host families' rather than 'employees'. My research to date has suggested that au pairs are much more like other domestic workers, in terms of the tasks that they do, their relationships with employers and the issues they face, than they are like members of the families they live with (see Cox, 2006). I am anxious to foreground their labour as *real* work and not to treat it as trivial.
2. When the research was being carried out these countries included all of the European Economic Area and Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, the Faeroes, Greenland, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Macedonia, Malta, Monaco, San Marino, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland and Turkey. In December 2002, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania joined the scheme because of government concern that a greater supply of au pairs was needed (Addley, 2002).
3. *The Independent* newspaper, in a guide to spending on 28 October 2006, featured a range of lingerie called 'The French Maid'. The newspaper invites readers to 'emulate alluring Parisian seductiveness in traditional black and white frills' and to 'bring alive the French Maid fantasy' (p. 8).
4. McClintock argues that in his development of the oedipal complex Freud replaces the maid with the mother to produce a seemingly universal theory based in nature, rather than one that admitted to the importance of historically specific social class structures.

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